Australian Human Rights Commission

Race Discrimination Commissioner
[redacted]

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Australian Bureau of Statistics

Via email – census.content@abs.gov.au

Consultation – Review of 2021 Census Topics

I am pleased to respond to your call for submissions to the Review of 2021 Census Topics – namely, to make a submission regarding the topic of cultural diversity.

Current approaches to cultural diversity

As the Australian Bureau of Statistics recognises, it is important that policy and service development is informed by an understanding of the backgrounds and origins of Australia's population. Through its collection of statistical data, the Bureau plays a crucial role in tracking the ethnic and cultural composition of the Australian population over time. The Bureau's work is vital to the identification of disparities across ethnic and cultural groups with respect to income, health, education and housing (among other things).

The Bureau currently captures information on cultural and language diversity in Australia through a number of variables (country of birth, indigenous status, year of arrival in Australia, languages spoken, and ancestry).[1]

While none of these variables alone provides a definitive measure of cultural diversity, the variable that arguably comes closest is that of ancestry. Through the Census, the Bureau asks a question which invites respondents to self-identify their ethnic or cultural origin. In the 2016 Census, 'Australian' was the second most commonly reported ancestry (after 'English'), with 23.3 per cent of people identifying it.[2]

As the Bureau has recognised in a recent discussion paper, the variable of ancestry involves some complications:

> "Australian" is used as the adjective to describe the culture that has developed in this country over the last two hundred years, and also to describe all members of the citizenry regardless of whether or not they regard their ethnicity, culture or ancestry as Australian.[3]

It appears the Bureau has taken an approach of deprioritising 'Australian' as a response to the question. In the Bureau's own published 'Collection Methods' on how to frame the question, the Bureau recommends "that 'Australian' be positioned last in the pick list of responses, before 'Other - please specify', to encourage respondents to consider the question and other ancestries with which they may identify."[4]

International approaches

Australia is relatively isolated among English-speaking liberal democracies in its approach to the collection of ethnic diversity data. A question concerning 'ancestry', combined with questions on language, place of birth, etc, does not garner comprehensive information for the purpose of understanding the ethnic composition of the Australian population.

The Commission has drawn attention to Australia's lack of comprehensive information on ethnic diversity on numerous occasions in its formal submissions and publications, including in its submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 2017.[5] The CERD submission recommended that the Australian Government collect more comprehensive data on racial discrimination, racially motivated crimes, cultural diversity and multiculturalism generally. [6]

Currently, the way Australia collects cultural diversity data does not provide comprehensive information for the purpose of understanding the racial or ethnic composition of the Australian population.

Internationally, the collection of cultural and ethnic diversity data has been used with some effect. For instance, in October 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May released a Race Disparity Audit, which examined the treatment of people of different backgrounds across health, education, employment and the criminal justice system. The Audit found, among other things, that ethnic minorities are under-represented at senior levels across the public sector, and there are disparities in unemployment rates, school performance, and home ownership.[7]

More relevantly, countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the United States each ask about ethnicity or race in their respective census exercises.

New Zealand

Pursuant to the Statistics Act 1975, New Zealand's data agency Stats NZ (Statistics New Zealand) collects through the New Zealand Census information about ethnicity.

The ethnicity question in the 2018 Census asked "Which ethnic group do you belong to?" and listed a number of groups, including 'New Zealand European', 'Māori' and 'Samoan'.[8]

The census form also collects information on Māori descent and tribe, country of birth, and other relevant cultural diversity variables.

In New Zealand, the government has consciously decided against including a 'New Zealander' response option for 'ethnicity', despite some public feedback advocating for its inclusion, including a public campaign around the time of the 2006 Census.

In the lead-up to the 2018 Census, Stats NZ engaged in consultation and received some feedback about the question of ethnicity. Its report stated: "The majority of [online] comments stated a dissatisfaction with the response options, claiming that they were insufficient and divisive. Many commenters felt that was an inadequate description and wanted a New Zealander

Figure 1: New Zealand Census 2016, q. 7.

response category. Others commented on the difference between national identity and ethnicity, and the value of the ethnicity data. In their view, less meaningful data would be the result if a New Zealander response option was included."[9]

In the end, the ethnicity question was not changed for the 2018 Census. Stats NZ had noted that fewer people now write-in 'New Zealander' as an ethnicity response (as few as 1.6 per cent in the 2013 Census).

Canada

The most recent Canadian census asked questions about both ancestry and race (as well as Aboriginal identification).[10] Question 17 asked "What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's ancestors?" and listed options, including Canadian, English, Chinese and others:

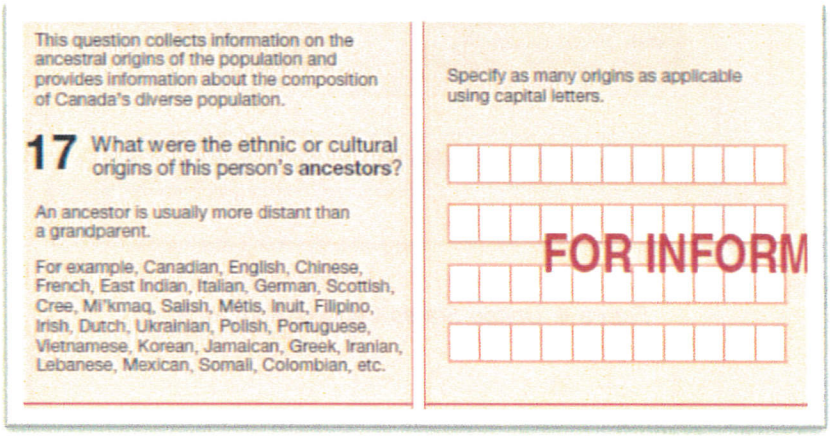


Figure 2: Canadian Census 2016, q. 17.

Question 19 asked about race, with options for 'White', 'South Asian', 'Chinese' and other categories:

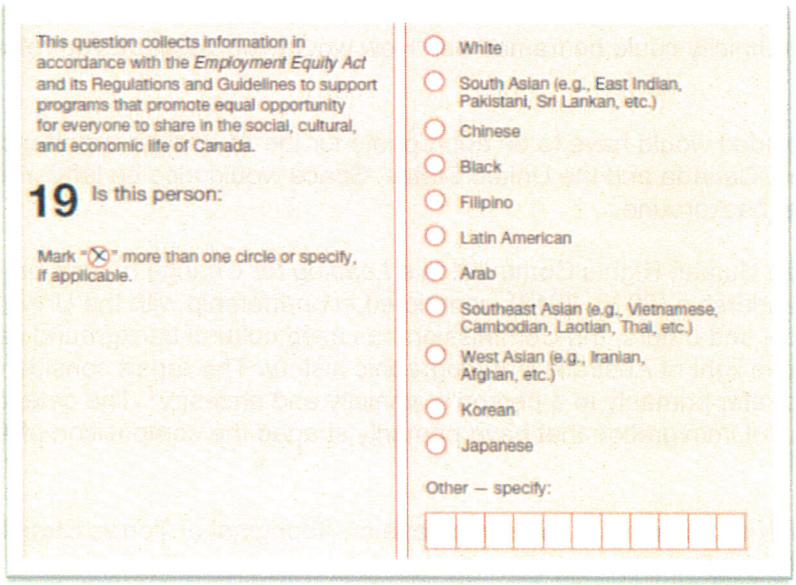
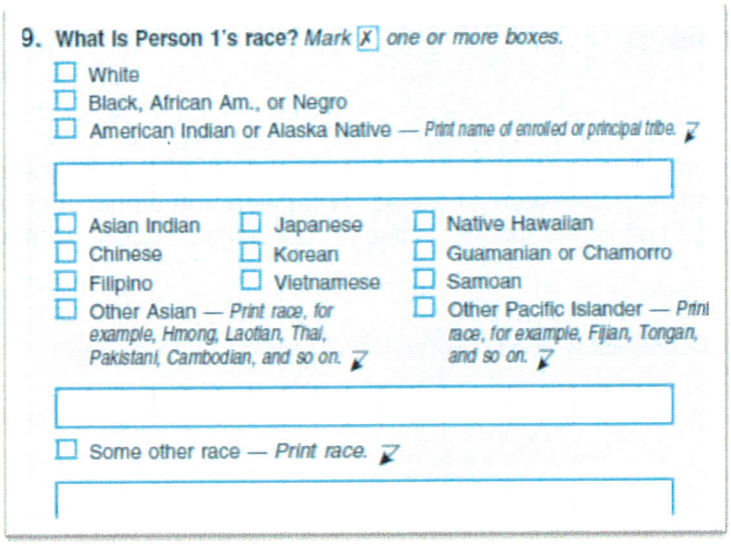


Figure 3: Canadian Census 2016, q. 19.

United States of America

The most recent United States census (2010) asked about race as well as, separately, about Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin.[11] This will remain unchanged in 2020.



9. What is Person 1's race? *Mark [X] one or more boxes.*

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.*

- ☐ Asian Indian
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.*
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
- ☐ Samoan
- ☐ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.*

- ☐ Some other race — *Print race.*

Figure 4: United States Census 2010, q. 9.

A way forward in Australia

The Bureau should consider an additional question that allows the Census to collect data specifically about ethnicity. This would allow for the collection of more meaningful data about ethnic and racial disparities, provide the Australian community with a more accurate depiction of our ethnic diversity, and provide the basis for meaningful policy interventions on cultural diversity.

A question on ethnicity could be framed as: "How would you describe your ethnic background?"

Categories provided would have to be appropriate for the Australian experience, as they are in New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Space would also be left for respondents to write-in another background.

In the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Leading for Change* reports on cultural diversity and leadership (2016, 2018), completed in partnership with the University of Sydney Business School and others, the Commission has used cultural background categories that are appropriate in light of Australia's demographic history. The report considers cultural background "to refer primarily to a person's ethnicity and ancestry". The categories "reflect the main waves of immigration that have primarily shaped the composition of Australian society today"[12]:

- 'Indigenous' designates those who have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural background.
- 'Anglo-Celtic' describes those cultural backgrounds that are English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish.

- 'European' includes all European backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic – including North-West European (e.g. German, French, Dutch) and Southern and Eastern European (e.g. Italian, Greek, Polish).
- 'Non-European' encompasses all other cultural backgrounds, including South-East Asian (e.g. Vietnamese, Malaysian), North-East Asian (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean), Southern and Central Asian (e.g. Indian, Sri-Lankan, Afghani), Latin American (e.g. Mexican, Colombian), Middle Eastern and North African (e.g. Egyptian, Turkish), Sub-Saharan African (e.g. Nigerian, Zimbabwean) and Oceanic and Pacific Islander (e.g. Maori, Tongan).

As the report reiterates, the classification "does not imply that there are only four ways in which people's cultural backgrounds can be expressed or captured ... we use this classification simply as a conceptual aid to understanding the representation of cultural diversity. It provides a means of aggregating cultural backgrounds in a way that permits more sophisticated analysis than otherwise possible."[13]

The *Leading for Change* reports admittedly provide only something of a starting point. Were there to be a move to collect data on cultural diversity that includes specific attention to ethnicity, it would be appropriate to consider whether categories such as 'Asian' and 'Middle Eastern & North African' should also be included alongside categories such as 'Indigenous', 'Anglo-Celtic' and 'European'.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Yours sincerely

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Race Discrimination Commissioner

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Ancestry Standard, 2014, Version 2.1 - Introduction' (4 April 2017) At http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/CCBC4BEA9D918AD8CA257D41001730B6?Opendocument (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[2] Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2016 Census QuickStats'. At http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036 (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Ancestry Standard, 2014, Version 2.1 – Underlying Concepts' (4 April 2017) http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/1200.0.55.009Main%20Features202014,%20Version%202.1?opendocument (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Ancestry Standard, 2014, Version 2.1 – Collection Methods' (4 April 2017) http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/1200.0.55.009Main%20Features302014,%20Version%202.1?opendocument (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[5] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/submissions/submission-cerd-2017 (last viewed 29 June 2018) Cf. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited*. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/leading-change-blueprint-cultural-diversity-and-inclusiv-0 (last viewed 29 June 2018) 7.
[6] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/submissions/submission-cerd-2017 (last viewed 29 June 2018) 17.
[7] UK Government, 'PM Words at Race Disparity Audit launch: 10 October 2017'. At https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-words-at-race-disparity-audit-launch-10-october-2017 (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[8] The full Census form is available at: Stats NZ, '2018 Census'. At https://www.stats.govt.nz/2018-census/ (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[9] Stats NZ, '2018 Census report on final content'. At https://www.stats.govt.nz/assets/Reports/2018-Census-report-on-final-content/2018-census-report-on-final-content.pdf (viewed 29 June 2018) 20.
[10] The full Census form is available at: Statistics Canada, '2016 Census 2A-L'. At http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Instr.pl?Function=getInstrumentList&Item_Id=295122&UL=1V (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[11] The full Census form is available at: United States Census Bureau, '2010'. At https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/questionnaires/2010_overview.html (last viewed 29 June 2018).
[12] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited*. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/leading-change-blueprint-cultural-diversity-and-inclusiv-0 (last viewed 29 June 2018) 5.
[13] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited*. At https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/leading-change-blueprint-cultural-diversity-and-inclusiv-0 (last viewed 29 June 2018) 4.